PORTSMOUTH DOCKYARD AND ITS WORKERS 1815-1875

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Summary

In its Victorian heyday, Portsmouth Dockyard was among the largest manufacturing enterprises in the world. During the 1860s, the Yard employed almost 5,500 men, and even at its lowest point during the long peace of the 1830s, the workforce never fell below 1,500. The years between 1815 and 1875 witnessed enormous changes in naval technology, with the introduction of steam power, the screw propeller, ironclad vessels, and the application of new manufacturing systems. Despite the power of tradition and continuity, these changes profoundly affected the workforce and managers of the Yard. Drawing on a wide range of primary sources, this paper explores such issues as work processes, management and administration, trade union organization, the co-operative movement, pilfering and embezzlement, and the Yard's wider impact on the life and government of the city of Portsmouth.

Cover:
Officials and recipients of the Portsmouth Dockyard Pension Society at the Dockyard gate, a print by Richard Livesay, published 1 November 1820. The society was founded 9 October 1815, 'for the purpose of raising and establishing a fund for the relief of widows and orphans'.
Portsmouth City Museums

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Portsmouth Dockyard and its Workers, 1815-1875

by John Field

The Dockyard dominated the life of nineteenth-century Portsmouth. Its presence could be sensed out at the very edges of the town, by eye, by ear, even by smell. In an age when a Manchester cotton mill might employ a few hundred men and women and be thought vast, thousands worked in the Dockyard, while tens of thousands more lived or traded with them. Its sheer size fascinated and sometimes thrilled: one visitor wrote in 1835 that

> Everything here is, indeed, upon a weighty scale; and, abstractly considered, the efforts of human industry seem too weak and impotent to achieve the important works that are here displayed.[1]

Another writer compared the anchor forges to the 'complicated honours of the Cyclopean cave'.[2] It was as though the business of making ships was too large to fit a human scale.

Yet the Dockyard was, above all other things, a human endeavour. Moreover, while its influence upon the rest of Portsmouth was certainly significant, the rhythms and organization and economy of the Yard did not mechanically determine the facts of life for the town as a whole. Portsmouth did not dance unthinkingly to a tune written elsewhere, in the Admiralty. The Dockyard and its routines arose in turn from the countless thousands of people, immigrant as well as locally-born, who worked in it and built their own ways of living and working. Of course the Dockyard was a fine cog in the far-reaching machine that was the British Empire; but it was also the creation of those who built and worked in it, and it is chiefly with the history of these men and women that this paper is concerned.

The Evolution of the Dockyard, 1815-1875

Portsmouth owes its naval significance to its geography. Although Portchester was chosen by the Romans as a safe haven for their ships, it was near the harbour entrance that John de Gisors founded the town of Portsmouth about 1180, and where King John, a few years later, set up a simple and short-lived naval base. With the expansion of England's navy under the Tudors, a royal dockyard was established on waste ground to the north of the town walls, and this grew rapidly under the later Stuarts. By the 1770s, Portsea, an entirely new town inhabited mainly by its workers, had sprung up next to the Yard with a population greater than that of Portsmouth itself.

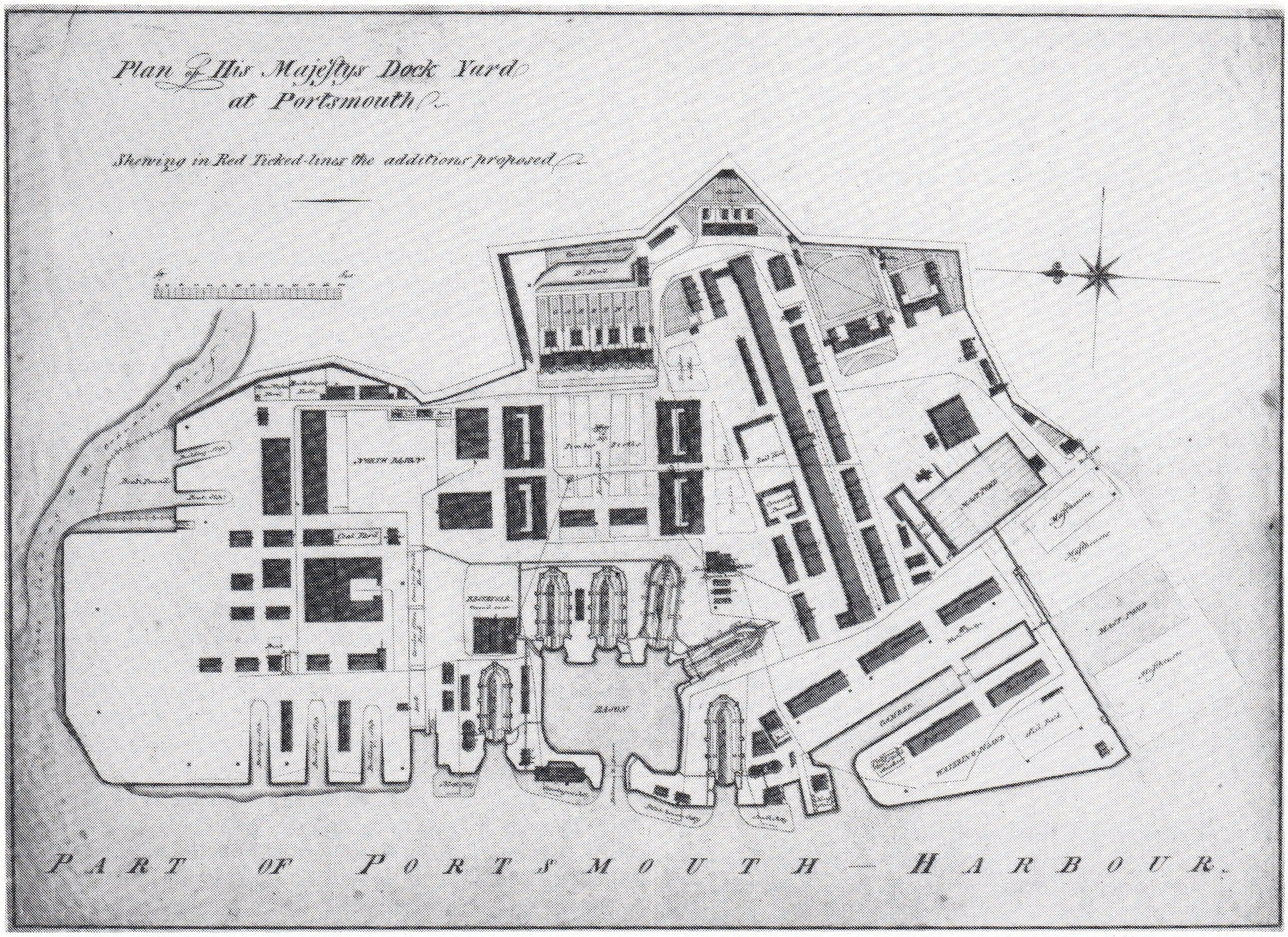
High walls surrounded the Dockyard, with Marines and Yard police guarding the gates. To reach the gates you passed down the Hard, a waterfront street whose north side consisted of shops selling everything from officers' uniforms to false teeth. Scattered outside the Dockyard gates stood a bustling, moving and often rowdy population of relish sellers, sailors, hawkers, Yard workers' wives and children, fences, carters, horses, dogs and idle strollers. From inside came constant noise, deafening to all and confusing and horrifying to strangers, but comprising to local ears half a dozen distinct sounds, each with its own meaning. To enter as a visitor, one needed an introduction of some kind; but the formalities were - the French aside - few. Indeed, in a Britain where the exotic and bizarre were on display in every museum and fairground, the Dockyard became something of a showpiece: when two enormous Nasmyth steam hammers were purchased in the 1840s, the blacksmiths soon discovered that they could be set to crack the shell of a nut - a diverting trick shown to numerous visitors, including Pasha Ibrahim of Egypt and King Victor Emanuel of Sicily.[3]

Entering the Dockyard for the first time was also something of a shock. Coming from a world of one- and two-storey buildings, squeezed into the narrow and often filthy streets of Portsea, visitors crossed into a world where all was orderly, clean, and above all large. It was hardly surprising that contemporary visitors were obsessed with the Dockyard's size. Towards the end of the Napoleonic Wars, the Yard had five building slips and six repair docks, as well as specialist workshops for the manufacture of sails, ropes, metal fittings, anchors, masts, capstans, pulley blocks and so on, sprawling over something like 100 acres.[4] Although there was a dramatic modernization of the facilities during the 1840s, in total acreage the Yard remained at about this size until the mid-1860s, when the Admiralty ordered the reclaiming of mudflats and enclosure of open fields, adding another 178 acres and allowing the authorities to build seven new docks and two more basins.[5] In this immense acreage worked a body of men that, even in the hardest years of the 1830s, never fell below 1,500, and at times in the 1860s topped 5,000.[6] A typical Manchester cotton mill, by contrast, might have employed two or three hundred people.

As a state-owned industry, the Yard's fortunes were determined largely by two forces: politics and war. Even the most obvious technical change was more likely to be introduced if the Admiralty of the day happened to favour it. While the need to maintain a strong Navy at all times was accepted by all British policy-makers, obviously enough the Dockyard was most active at times of war or the threat of it; by contrast, activity fell off in times of peace (though not at first, for the repair of damaged ships, and the decommissioning or demolition of redundant warships, could last for many months). Politically, the dockyards as a whole occasionally came into the public eye; they were expensive to run, and reforming governments naturally sought economies and efficiency gains, whether to save on taxes or to improve on performance or both.

Certainly the Yard's fortunes fluctuated with those of the Navy more generally. Apart from its imperial role, the Navy was only involved in one major European conflict between 1815 and 1875; and in the event, its contribution to the Crimean War was not a substantial one (Russia after all was hardly a major sea power). When the Navy was reduced after the Napoleonic Wars, the Yard at first was kept busy repairing damaged vessels or taking them out of active service. Nonetheless, between 1813 and 1820, the workforce fell by some 1,500 men. It touched 5,000 during the

Plan of Portsmouth Royal Dockyard with proposed additions, c.1815.
Portsmouth City Museums



Crimean War (when Portsmouth was also an embarkation point for the British Army), and fell again immediately afterwards. Indeed, as part of the general reaction against military incompetence, there was an enquiry into 'Dockyard Economy' which led to some retrenchment. Activity and employment both picked up again during the mid-1860s, when there were fears of a French invasion. Military matters were, then, an important indicator of the Yard's fortunes.

Political changes also affected the Dockyard's development. In particular, there were three periods when the forces of reform touched the Dockyard system, in one case altering it profoundly. In the early 1830s, the dockyards were reviewed first by the then Tory government, then by the incoming Whig reform government, whose First Lord of the Admiralty, Sir James Graham, was convinced that the dockyards were sinks of waste and corruption. Graham, a Whig himself but born into the Tory squirarchy, streamlined naval administration: the Navy Board was abolished and responsibility for the dockyards was allocated to a permanent departmental head; manning levels were sharply cut back; and the patronage system of appointments was brought to an end. At its lowest point, the workforce in Portsmouth Dockyard reached a mere 1,563 - below the permitted establishment level. During the 1840s, the yards underwent a second period of reform, for part of this time under a First Lord who was also a Portsmouth MP, Sir Francis Baring.

Baring had first been elected to Parliament as a Whig by the unreformed electorate in 1826. He continued to represent Portsmouth on the Liberal benches until receiving his peerage in 1865. A member of the famous banking family, he married the fifth daughter of Admiral Sir George Grey, Commissioner of Portsmouth Dockyard (and himself a relative, of course, of the great Whig leader). As First Lord, Baring turned out to be a modest but determined modernizer; economies were made, but relatively mild ones; however, during his period of office he

encouraged the yards to pursue the process of technological restructuring. In Portsmouth this included opening up a steam factory to install and repair engines and build boilers, and reviewing its labour policies. The final period of reform, under the 1868 Liberal government, brought less innovation than rather a return to the principles of national economy; from some 5,400 men in 1866 the workforce dropped in four years by almost 2,000.

Of these three periods of reform, it was the middle one which most visibly reshaped the Dockyard. Technical change came slowly to the British Navy in the early decades of the century. Of course, there were good reasons as well as bad for this conservatism: if engineers were unsure how fast an iron ship would rust, or how long it would take to sink if holed, why should their Lordships be any more confident? However, technological conservatism was the product not simply of the Admiralty's wish to stay with the technology which had defeated Napoleon. Most governments in the period after 1815 were looking to cut public spending, rather than invest in naval innovation; after all, the imposition of income tax during the wars against France was still seen as a temporary measure, and one which would not survive more than a year or two of peace. Furthermore the first years of peace brought poor harvests and political unrest, and government attention was focused upon the pressing matter of regaining control. There were sound naval reasons for objecting to most of the innovations being suggested: the proposal to use paddle steamers as ships of the line, for example, faced a number of practical criticisms, ranging from the loss of firepower because of the area taken up by the paddles to the vulnerability of a large paddle to enemy gunfire. Naval planners had good reason to be cautious about the application of steam and iron - so revolutionary in their impact elsewhere on British society - to the Royal Navy. Even once paddle steamers were widespread, and screw propellers out of their infancy, hostility towards steam, and towards the begrimed engineer officers, was to be found in every wardroom.[7] The introduction of iron ships was equally piecemeal.

For three decades, the naval dockyards concentrated on wooden ships. For the first few years of peace, ships of the line had to be decommissioned; subsequently, the yards continued their normal business of manufacturing, repairing and adapting wooden vessels. At Portsmouth, it was not until 1842 that the proposal for a steam factory was aired; work began in 1845. By 1850, it employed almost 500 men.[8] At around the same time, the sawpits were also mechanized. Previously the sawyers had worked in pairs, in sawpits scattered around the Yard; in the early 1840s, a steam-powered sawmill was opened whose six blades could get through eight to ten logs daily, doing the work of sixteen pairs of sawyers.[9] In 1849 the Master Shipwright (John Fincham, another modernizer) visited a number of private joiners' yards to see what the Yard might learn from them; on his return from Cubitt's, the London builders, Fincham brought all the joiners into a single workshop for ease of supervision, and introduced morticing machines and circular saws.[10] Having purchased the two giant Nasmyth steam hammers while the steam factory was under construction, the Admiralty also investigated the Crewe smithery of the London and North-Western Railway in 1848, urging the Dockyard administrators to make productivity gains from 'proper care and supervision' over the way these were used.[11]

The third period of reform, with Childers at the Admiralty, saw a planned reduction of 1,500 men in the workforce in a single year. This reduction fell particularly heavily upon the unskilled and on those artisans who specialized solely in woodworking, coinciding as it did with the launch of Portsmouth's first ironclad. Of course, iron ships had been repaired in the Yard from their earliest days, but the launch in 1869 of the 4,400 ton *Devastation*, with its two gun turrets, marked a new era.[12] While gun turrets and iron plate armour were not new, the *Destruction* was the first naval vessel to carry masts solely for the purpose of signalling, rather than to support sails.

Between 1815 and 1870, then, the Yard adjusted to a lengthy period of peace in Europe combined with constant change in the nature of the Navy. Although it had to retain the capacity to survive any European conflict, its actual role during most of this period was imperial. Its ships could and did spend long periods at great distance from Britain, often in poor sailing conditions - enforcing the opium trade to China, protecting transport vessels to Australia, patrolling the coasts of Ceylon, and so on. Quality and durability were always at a premium. Yet though technological change was consequently often slow, it too made itself felt, most obviously in the shift from an all-wooden Navy in 1815 to the introduction of steam-driven ironclads in the 1860s. Overriding all, though, were the imperatives of political change.

Management and Administration

Managing an enterprise as vast and complex as a naval dockyard was, to put it mildly, a challenge. Admiral Sir Charles Napier once commented that the admirals placed in charge of the dockyards were, in his opinion, 'greatly overworked'.[13] Certainly, nothing in their careers could have prepared them for such an experience: no ship employed as many men, nor any family estate. Nor could they simply copy the practices of managers in private industry. If the size of the dockyards' workforces were not sufficient on its own, the absence of both profit motive and competitive product market, combined with a premium upon quality rather than volume of output, made any comparison superficial.[14] Any attempts to transfer the discipline and hierarchy of the Army soon foundered; the Yard workers were civilians, and in no mind to let anyone forget the fact. Regulating the work of the dockyards required an elaborate system of management.

At the head of this enterprise stood the figure of the Admiral Superintendent. As a senior naval officer, he was answerable to the Admiralty, communicating directly with the surveyor of the Navy, and as Superintendent he had direct oversight of the civilian officers who managed the daily work of the Yard. This clear and direct structure was the result of Graham's reforms. As

well as abolishing the Navy Board, Graham got rid of the post of Resident Commissioner, a job which was in the gift of the Admiral Superintendent and allowed the latter both to exercise patronage to pay off old favours as well as to spend very little time running the Dockyard. Graham also placed an upper limit of five years on holders of the post, in order to encourage movement at the top and prevent Superintendents from accepting local established ways.

The Admiral Superintendent had a residence inside the Yard; his family were expected to play an active part in local charities and cultural life, as well as to act as host to visiting dignitaries, naval or civilian. After Graham's reforms, it was a demanding post and an unpopular one. Admiral Sir Frederick Maitland, appointed under the Graham administration, complained that it was 'a description of service I never should have sought'. After two years of attempting to escape to his Scottish estate (as he would have been able to do before the reforms), Maitland thought that Graham owed the family a favour, and asked for the promotion of his nephew; Graham passed the request on to the appropriate authorities, who turned it down.[15] Future Superintendents accepted that they had been given a real job to do, though they were not necessarily any happier about it than Maitland. Admiral Sir Astley Cooper Key, though a desperately ambitious man, was in 1870 glad to escape from Portsmouth after one year even if the outcome was a posting to Malta Dockyard, hardly the most prestigious job in the Navy.[16] The tradition of appointing a naval officer to run the dockyards has continued.

Below the Commissioner stood the Principal Officers, most of them civilians. In 1815 there were six Principal Officers, all theoretically of equal standing though in fact the Master Shipwright had considerably more real power than his fellows, not least because his responsibilities covered almost every major activity in the Yard as well as most of the labour force. The Master Attendant, a ship's master, took care of ships afloat, the sailmakers' loft and the rigging house; as a naval officer, from 1832 he stood in for the Superintendent during any absence. The Clerk of the Yard acted as secretary to the Superintendent, the Clerk of the Cheque looked after financial matters, the Clerk of the Survey took receipt of all deliveries into the Yard and the Storekeeper was responsible for guarding and issuing them. In 1830, the post of Clerk of the Cheque was abolished, followed subsequently by the other Clerks' posts; in 1844 the post of Chief Engineer was created, only to be combined with that of Master Shipwright in the 1860s. In 1875, the position of Master Shipwright and Chief Engineer was altered to Chief Constructor (the professional association preferred to speak of the 'Naval Architect'). By this time, the other remaining Principal Officers were the Storekeeper and Master Attendant. At senior level, then, the management structure had steadily been streamlined. The demands of technical change had been met by the reallocation of responsibilities, either to the existing Principal Officers or to more junior grades.

Below the Principal Officers came a layer of middle management. Again this was changed over time, but in 1815 it was large and complex. With the help of two Assistants (reduced under Graham to one), the Master Shipwright had responsibility for a range of Master Workmen: the Timber Master, Master Boatbuilder, Master Mastmaker, Mechanist and Engineer, Foreman of the Yard, Foreman of New Work, Foreman Afloat and the Masters of minor trades (joiners, smiths, bricklayers, painters, masons, etc.). The Master Rigger and Master Sailmaker came under the Master Attendant, as did the Boatswain of the Yard (in charge of general labourers). In 1831, the number of middle management posts was reduced: among the losses were the posts of Mechanist and Engineer, Second Assistant Master Shipwright, and several minor trades' officers. In the early 1840s two new posts were created - Director of Works and Chief Engineer (later merged with that of Master Shipwright) - and in 1862 an Accountant was appointed. By the 1870s, then, middle management had been slimmed down but not greatly so. With the absorption of the Chief Engineer's post into the Master Shipwright's, a source of conflict was removed; the Chief Constructor's domain now unambiguously took in the whole manufacturing, repair and demolition work of the Yard. It is not surprising, then, that the work of the senior shipwrights' officers became increasingly professionalized: more attention was paid to formal training and qualifications, and to the possession of both technical expertise and scientific knowledge.

At junior level, the Yard's management structure changed dramatically throughout the nineteenth century. It was among junior management that the transition from the use of naval hierarchical patterns was most apparent. Change was so extensive that it cannot be described in detail. The grade of Quarterman, who led the gangs of shipwrights and caulkers, was simply abolished in 1822,[17] and a number of changes took place subsequently in the Leading Man grade, particularly in so far as it was a rung on the promotion ladder. In February 1847, Baring's Admiralty laid down that the Leading Man would be chosen from at least three candidates, following an examination in writing, arithmetic, measuring and draughtsmanship; for every four shipwrights' gangs there would also be an Inspector, again appointed after examination; and so on up to Assistant Master Shipwright.[18] However, the most significant changes that took place involved the partial professionalization of the senior and middle management of the yards, through a number of attempts to improve their training.

Other than the Master Attendant, senior and middle managers were recruited from within the dockyards. All had served as apprentices or junior clerks; most had moved around the yards to widen their experience, and also to enhance their authority (people were less likely to obey you if they remembered what you were like as a young apprentice boy). However, in 1809 the Navy Board created an apprentice school at Portsmouth, under Dr James Inman, intended to form a 'superior' class of craftsmen from whom officers could be picked. Graham closed the school in 1832, partly to save money but also because he was fed up with

Inman badgering him with his ideas about steam power and metal materials. A new school opened in 1842, with promotion to the upper grade made dependent upon an examination; it too was closed (again by Graham), in 1853. Finally, the Admiralty agreed that a superior grade of apprentices was indeed desirable, opening a central School of Naval Architecture in 1864 at Kensington.[19] In the meantime, the existing senior officers had founded their own Institute of Naval Architects with a view to updating their knowledge through conferences and publications, maintaining professional standards, and lobbying to improve their standing.

Increasingly, the senior Portsmouth officers were drawn from those who had been involved with the schools. John Fincham, Master Shipwright between 1844 and 1852, had been involved as a supervisor with the first School of Naval Architecture in 1812 (having come out of his time in 1802, he was too old to have been a pupil there). Fincham was also president of the local Literary and Philosophical Society. He read a lengthy paper to the Royal Statistical Society and published a number of articles, a treatise on mastmaking, and a book on the history of shipbuilding.[20] Like his colleague Inman, Fincham was a modernizer: he designed and helped build the first steam frigate, the *Arrogant*, and pressed vigorously for the adoption of the steam propeller. James Bennett, Timber Master in the late '40s and early '50s and another modernizer, attended the apprentice school between 1814 and 1820; by 1828 he was a foreman at Portsmouth. By around 1850, it was accepted that the senior managers in the Yard should come from those who had received a proper training, though the Admiralty was reluctant to provide this itself. By the 1860s, technical training was normal for the officer grades, and professional updating was available through the Institute.

Yet there was some remaining ambiguity over the officers' standing. So far as the Admiral Superintendent was concerned, there was no question that he was both officer and gentlemen. When the Admiralty tried to discover in 1848 whether the yards were left unsupervised at lunch times, the Portsmouth Superintendent treated the enquiry as gross impertinence. Trying again, the Admiralty replied:

> My Lords did not imagine that the Admiral Superintending Her Majesty's Dockyard at Portsmouth, was likely to dine at the same time as the artificers; but they did think it necessary to enquire whether the Principal Officers, & others immediately below them in rank, were in the habit of leaving the Yard for Dinner, immediately after the return of the men from theirs ... My Lords beg leave to observe that your letter contains no reply to the enquiry.[21]

With the Superintendent, the Admiralty would 'beg leave to observe'; the Chief Engineer, on the other hand, could be robustly reminded after a delay in completing works,

> that his first duty is to obey, readily & cheerfully, the instructions transmitted to him by their Lordships.[22]

The distinction between the more senior naval officers and the 'master artificers' was intended to mirror the wider social division between gentility - which certainly included the Admiral Superintendent - and the respectable but more plebeian world of trade and commerce.

This boundary between different sectors of management had a major unintended consequence. Although there was a social and cultural gap between managers and workers, the view that the 'master artificers' were tradesmen rather than gentlemen led to some blurring of the division between masters and men. Indeed, it was observed by the Committee on Dockyard Economy in 1859 that

> in the Dockyard and Factory Services, the line between the employers and the employed had hitherto been very indistinctly drawn, and that there has been a tendency to class the chief professional officers amongst the employed.[23]

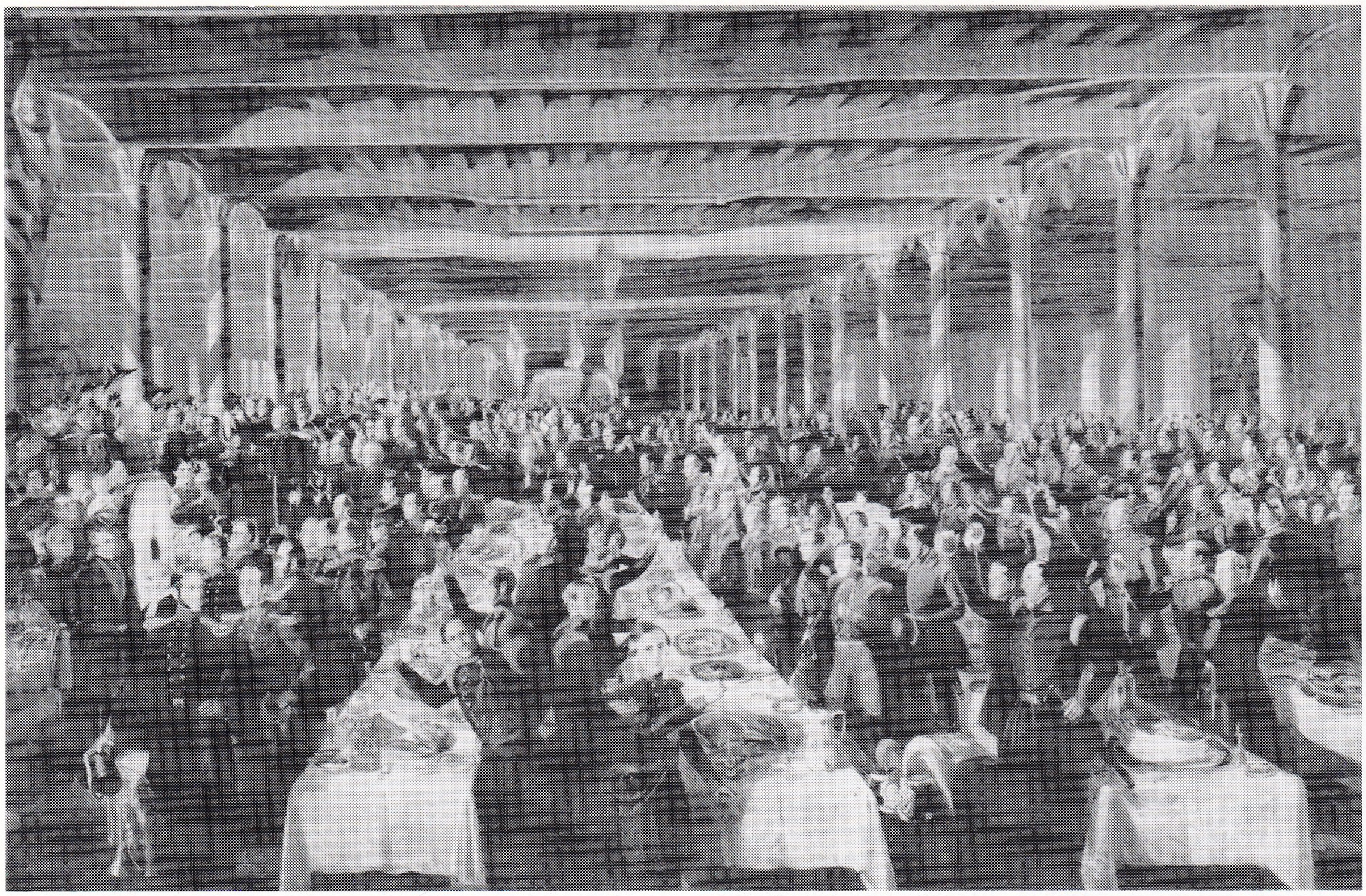
The ambiguous status of the Dockyard officers could also be seen in their involvement in community life. Neither gentlemen by birth nor craftsmen by salary, their status was uncertain. When the Assistant Master Shipwright was made Brigade Commander of the local Volunteers, one battalion commander resigned and his Medical Officer (a leading Southsea Conservative) complained of being commanded by 'a carpenter'.[24] In salary, the Dockyard Officers were as well-paid as any top manager. The Master Shipwright received £650 yearly, over twice the sum paid in the 1860s to the Yard chaplain.[25] In status, though, the civilian Yard Officers were quite clearly tainted by their association with manufacture.

Dockyard management involved both technical and managerial skills. While the Admiralty maintained a powerful naval overview of Yard administration throughout, as a result of the superintendency of a serving admiral, the technical expertise of the civilian managers was of growing importance. Increasingly, too, the importance of scientific and technological knowledge in shipbuilding was accompanied by the formal transfer of power among the civilian officers to the Master Shipwright and his immediate subordinates. As a master craftsman, however well-educated and paid, the Master Shipwright remained a 'carpenter' rather than a gentleman outside the Yard; within it, he was a powerful and respected figure.

The Artificers of the Yard

For most of Portsmouth's history, the town's largest employer was the Dockyard. With a workforce of 3,850 in 1813 and 4,004 in 1870, its social and economic significance was considerable. With its wider connections - families, traders, publicans - the Yard workforce comprised a substantial proportion of the population. It made itself felt in the political world as well, for all that barely a handful of working men could vote before 1867, and only the more affluent among them after that. Within the Yard, the workforce formed a world of its own, with its own gradations,

Rear-Admiral Prescott proposing the health of Queen Victoria at a dinner for the Royal Dockyard Battalion of Volunteers, 25 May 1848, a water-colour painting by R. H. C. Ubsdell. Formed in 1847, the Battalion rapidly grew to consist of twelve companies of infantry and twelve of artillery, totalling 1,870 dockyardmen, who were paid to attend drill practice three evenings each week.
Portsmouth City Museums

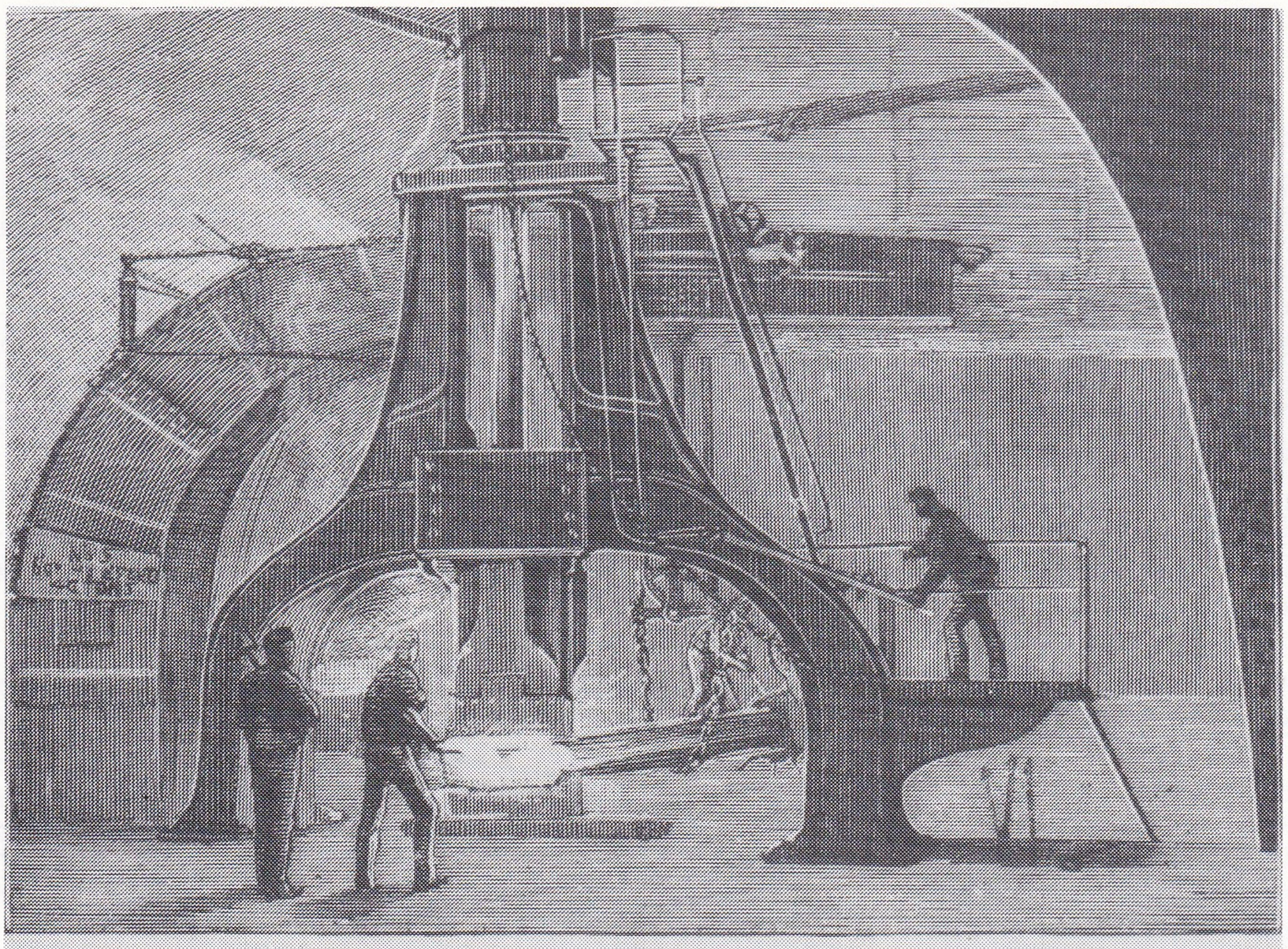


culture and organizations. Indeed, until well into the 1840s, the authorities spoke and wrote of them as 'the People of the Yard', as though they were its citizens and subjects.

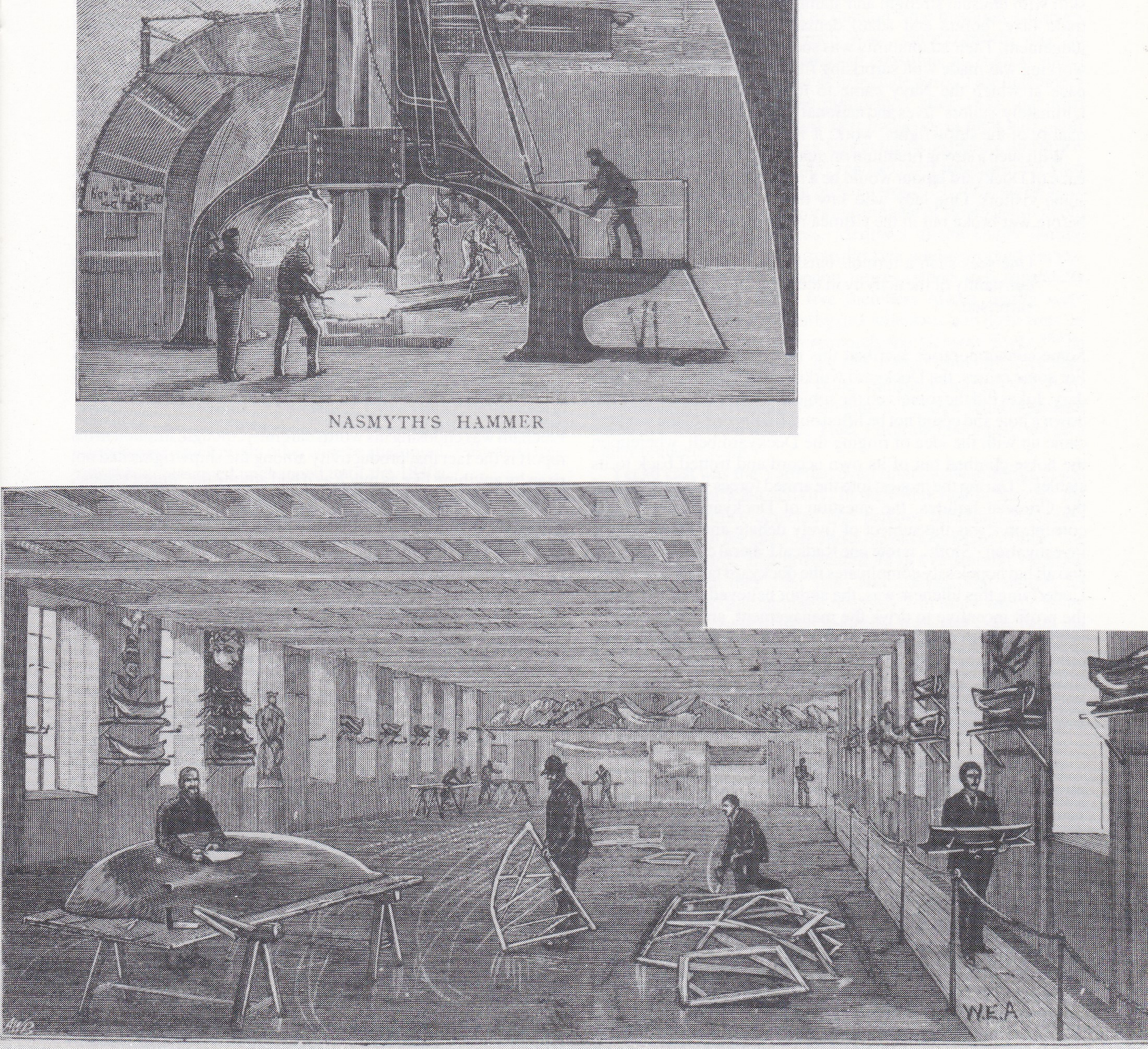
Internally, the workforce was finely subdivided by skill. At the top of the hierarchy stood the shipwrights, their supremacy challenged only, after 1849, by the skilled engineers of the steam factory. Highly skilled, apprentice-trained and far more flexible than their fellow shipwrights in merchant yards, the naval shipwrights shaped timber for use in building and repair work, planned and laid out new vessels in the mould lofts, worked up capstans and built boats, coppered the bottoms of vessels built under contract elsewhere, broke up older ships; rumour held that they made furniture illegally for the senior officers.[26] Unless they were employed about the workshops or under the Timber Master, the shipwrights worked in 'companies' of twenty (fifteen craftsmen, five apprentices), led by a Quarterman - or, after 1822, a Leading Man. At the start of a new financial year, the existing companies were dissolved. The Leading Men then took turns to pick a man each until new companies were formed, an arrangement known as 'shoaling', and highly approved by the men as a way of balancing out any inequalities between individuals' earning capacities. It was acceptable to the Yard management as a means of preventing collusion between supervisors and men, and encouraging supervisors to identify and become familiar with the skill and workrate of each individual shipwright. Up to 1860 and the introduction of iron shipbuilding, the shipwrights' work had changed little since the Tudor Dockyard had been founded. On one occasion the local newspaper described the scaffolding system in the Yard as being unchanged 'from the time of Noah',[27] and that was probably true. Yet the shipwrights were generally pragmatic about change, perhaps because most innovation in the Navy was so piecemeal. After a brief dispute at Chatham Dockyard in 1862, the shipwrights seem to have decided that metal shipbuilding was inevitable; rather than fight, they chose to adapt to the new material, maintaining their central place in the labour process.[28]

Within the wider workforce, the shipwrights formed something of an élite. With apprentices, the shipwrights accounted for

Dockyardmen at work in the smithery and mould loft, 1885.
Portsmouth City Museums



NASMYTH'S HAMMER



MOULD LOFT

over one third of the Yard's workforce; no other occupation was so numerous. They were expected to combine a high degree of skill with unusual strength and stamina. Their basic tools of the trade (axe, borers and adze) demanded force, accuracy and judgement. Their adaptability was such that the transition to iron working was made with surprising fluidity, even considering the pace at which the Navy came to terms with metal shipping. Ultimately, sailors' lives and national power would depend on the quality of the shipwrights' work; it was not undertaken lightly.

With such a strong premium on quality, it was accepted that the pace of Dockyard labour would be a measured one. This puzzled some visitors. One lady who saw the Dockyard a short while before war broke out in the Crimea reported that

> One sees such a turmoil outside the gates, and reads so constantly of the activity in the dockyards, that I was quite surprised.[29]

Some contemporaries ascribed this measured pace to idleness. For some critics, the Dockyard worker's laziness became legendary. Jokes did the rounds on the subject: in one, a Yard horse fell down a hole and could not be lifted out; finally one of the workers came up with the idea of ringing the Dockyard bell, whereupon the horse climbed out of its own accord and trotted back to its stables.[30] During the inquest into the armed forces which followed the Crimean failures, the question of Dockyard idling - and corruption - was the subject of lively debate and some solemn investigation. 'Sloth', wrote one Radical Liberal critic, 'seriously and all but hopelessly complicates the dockyard labour question'. Underlying this idleness was, the author believed, the absence of the profit incentive to drive the management, and above all the lack of any fear of bankruptcy, 'that motive which alone binds private employers and employed together'.[31] Yet economic issues apart, the Admiralty was concerned to balance the need for quality with the equal necessity of meeting deadlines. Payment systems combined with workplace discipline were the chief tools at its disposal.

Payment systems were a well-established way of regulating a large workforce. Hours of work tended to vary on a seasonal basis; most people toiled in the open air, and depended on daylight for visibility, though clerks and factory hands worked a standard day under gaslight. For most of the Yard men, therefore, payment was not based on hours of attendance but on output.

Performance-related pay - known as 'Task and Job' - had been introduced in parts of the workforce in the mid-1770s, though paid quarterly in arrears, like salaries. In order to sharpen the link between output and pay, the Admiralty agreed in 1812 to move to weekly payments. Although the men had been receiving weekly allowances against the wages due to them, calculating the weekly earnings of men on such large-scale and complex work as shipbuilding proved tough, not least because each ship tended to be different from the last. Nevertheless, by August 1813, after the companies had chosen representatives to collect and dish out their pay, the first weekly payments started.[32] Under Task and Job, a list of prices published in 1811 remained in place until 1832 (though prices were cut across-the-board by 20% in 1822), when Graham sought to control wage costs by placing all the men on day pay. However, in 1847 Task and Job was reintroduced. The problem of wages drift was handled by placing an upper limit on the men's earnings, which remained until the Crimean War persuaded the Admiralty to remove the limit.[33]

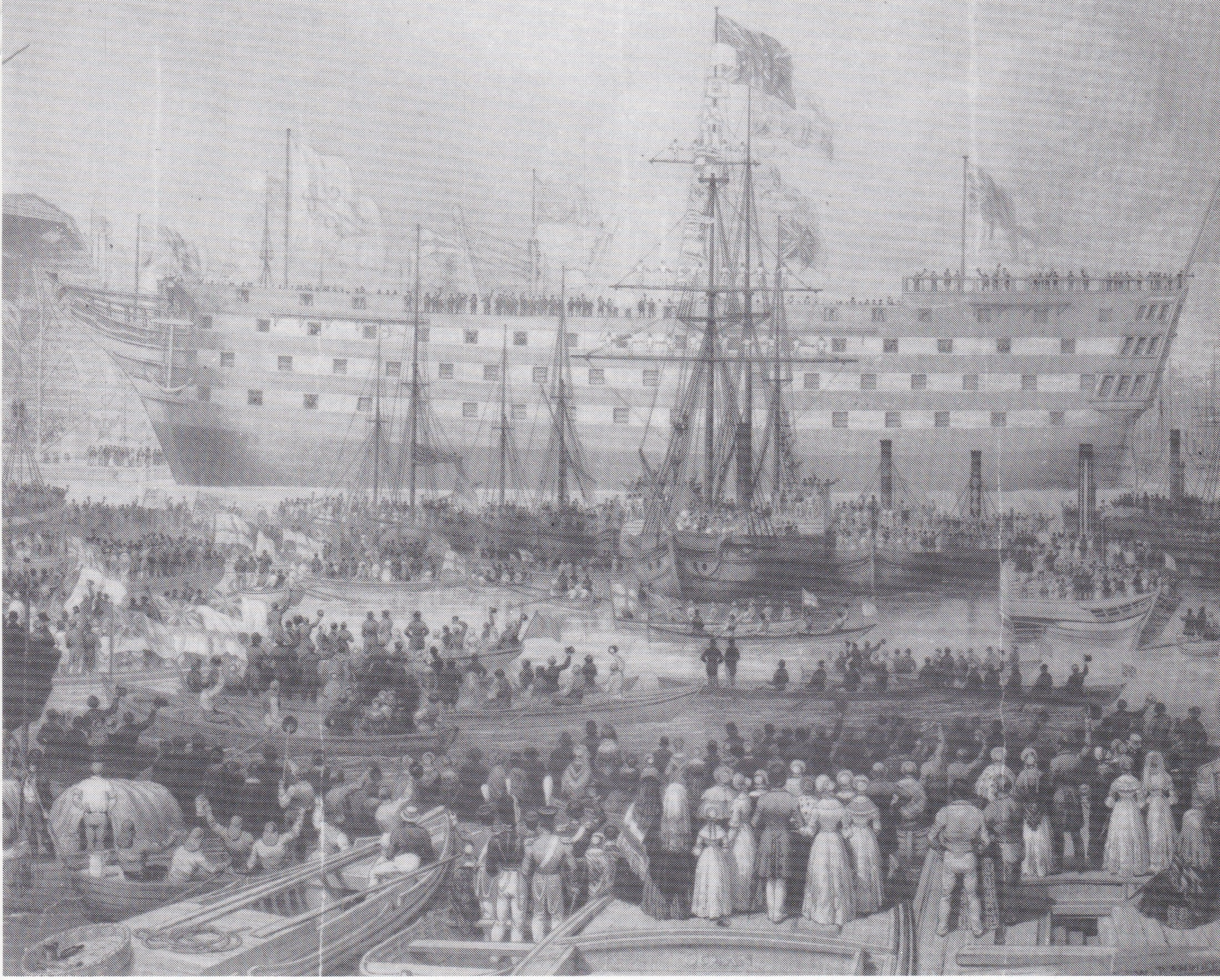
In general, Task and Job was accepted by the Yard managers as the best means of regulating the labour process through the wage system. As John Fincham reported to the Admiralty in 1848, Task and Job was

> working beneficially to the service, by ensuring that the quantity of work performed will always be something more than an equivalent to the wages paid. The evidence of its advantages are clear by the quantity of work now performed by the shipwrights, over what was formerly done; and which is more conspicuous in the minor trades, as the joiners, smiths, sawyers, &c.[34]

Fincham was choosing his words carefully, though; implicit in his report is the fact that productivity among the shipwrights had not risen by anything like as much as it had among the 'minor trades'. As they were not engaged on repetitive detail tasks, unlike the smiths or joiners, the measurers found the shipwrights' work hard to deal with; hence the abolition of the limit on earnings during the Crimean War. According to the Committee on Dockyard Economy, shipwrights on Task and Job worked harder than men on day pay, and earned more - 5*s*. or 6*s*. daily, compared with 4*s*. beforehand; but they never did so much that the price lists were changed. Even more suspiciously, they earned almost as much in winter as in summer, though the working day was several hours shorter during the early nights.[35] In its preferred solution - bestowing greater disciplinary power on the Leading Men - the Committee sought to make the Yards more like private industry. This was not likely to commend itself either to the Yards' management or the Admiralty.

Skilled men in the Yard were expected largely to regulate themselves, with Task and Job acting as a steering mechanism. Employment in the Yard was for the majority of workers and especially the skilled men, unusually secure. While cotton hands or miners could expect long periods of unemployment followed by draining years of overtime, a kernel of dockyardmen - the 'established men' - were retained through thick and thin. Officially, the established men were those taken on to give the Dockyard its approved complement (or 'establishment'), as allowed in the Navy Estimates voted yearly by Parliament; they tended to be highly skilled craftsmen, though a minority of valued labourers were also taken onto the establishment from time to time. Inevitably more men were needed, particularly when crisis

The launch of the Neptune *(2,694 tons), 27 September 1832. At the time it was the biggest ship to have been built at Portsmouth Dockyard.*
Portsmouth City Museums



A page from the diary of William Webber, a dockyard cabin keeper (a type of storeman), May 1813.
Portsmouth City Records Office

loomed, than were allowed for in the Estimates; thus there was a fluctuating periphery of 'hired men', who could be dismissed when no longer required. Most of the unskilled labourers belonged to this group, though it also included the highly skilled engineers in the steam factory (a sign, perhaps, of the Admiralty's unwillingness to accept that the steam engineers were of more than passing significance).

Established men enjoyed a number of benefits beyond that of security. Establishment carried with it a pension, paid to men with over twenty years' service (before 1815, it had been thirty-five years' service, but this was reduced to enable the yards to shed labour in peacetime). For seven years, the pension was abolished as another Graham economy. The Admiralty reintroduced it in 1839, and in 1859 it was taken into the wider Civil Service superannuation scheme. Under the 1859 settlement, retired shipwrights now received up to £46 19*s*. yearly (£24 previously); first class labourers £31 6*s*. (previously ineligible).[36] Further benefits included paid holidays (including a half-day following a launch), paid sick leave and free medical attention. Unlike most working class people, the dockyardmen and their families had little need to fear the workhouse.

Establishment encouraged a man to identify himself with the Yard where he worked, and also more widely with 'the Service' as a whole. Established dockyardmen expected to stay with the same employer for their entire working life, while hired men hoped to join the establishment. At the same time, the Yard management could and did use the system as a means of keeping order. After all, these benefits were given at the discretion of the Superintendent, not as a right. In 1841, for example, the Admiralty reminded Superintendents of the basis on which pensions were given:

> My Lords will, as heretofore, grant their lower rate of Pension after 20 years service, provided the men recommended for the same shall have been found unfit for further service, and shall have maintained a good character; and they will only grant the higher rate of Pension to persons who, either from length of service, or from the injuries they may have sustained in a faithful and diligent discharge of their duties, shall merit particular indulgence.[37]

A 'Defaulter's Book' was kept in every Yard, and names were checked before any pension could be granted.

Thus the pension system illustrates the wide range of mechanisms used by management to reinforce their control over the workforce. In 1822, a labourer who had worked for fifteen years at Woolwich and nine at Portsmouth was refused a pension on account of his record of absenteeism, while two sawyers had their pensions reduced in 1848 'on account of indifferent character'.[38] Yard pensioners came and queued at the Yard to collect their pay, a visible reminder both of what might be lost, and that dockyardmen were on the books for life.

Dockyard conditions followed men home, and still made themselves felt among the retired and injured. Yet discipline was not much as it was in the Army or Navy, as is sometimes said, but of a broadly consensual and paternalist kind. For example, beer was readily available within the Yard for most of its history, initially from a licensed Tap. In 1813 the evangelical Yard Commissioner, George Grey, ordered that the blacksmiths be offered a pint of coffee for breakfast, at 3*d*. a man; to a man they refused it, as did the labourers when the same offer was made to them the same afternoon. The experiment was not continued.[39] When the anchor smiths petitioned in 1825 over the quality of their free beer allowance (given for heavy work), Grey took himself to the Tap to sample the beer, writing to the Navy Board to support the petitioners.[40] The blacksmiths' beer continued after the Tap was shut down in 1832, while others had to make do with a jug carried in at lunch-time by wives. By the 1850s, a local publican was permitted to bring a six-gallon barrel into the smithery every lunch-time. When a canteen was opened in the Yard in 1862, it sold beer, much as the Tap had done before it.[41] Yet heavy drinking was relatively rare.

In this context, the dockyardmen developed their own culture, and lived by their own rules. New entrants were trained in the Yard's ways by older, more experienced hands; managers came, not as outsiders, but from among the ranks of the workmen; the pace of dockyard life was steady, reflecting the premium on quality. Dockyardmen, especially the skilled men, were polite to one another, though there were exceptions (the labourers aside, the smiths and sawyers were generally regarded as bad-tempered and a little too fond of the bottle). A certain formality was expected when dockyardmen addressed one another. When a Quarterman named Joshua Allen was called by name during an unusually hectic morning roll-call in 1813, a cabin keeper thought it rare enough to note in his diary, adding that 'they are Calld "Mr" in General'.[42] William Webber's shock at the slip found its mirror image in Captain Marryat's fictional description of a gang at work in Portsmouth harbour:

> although men employed appeared to be sailors ... Instead of swearing, every body was so polite. 'Oblige me with a pull of the starboard bow hawser, Mr Jones'. - 'Ease off the larboard hawser, Mr Jenkins, if you please'. - 'Side her over, gentlemen, side her over' ... I asked of a bystander who these people were, and he told me that they were dockyard mateys.[43]

They were 'mateys' to a seaman like Marryat; to themselves, they were variously 'the people', 'the first naval artisans of the world', 'workmen', or most common of all, 'the dockyardmen'.[44]

Policing the Dockyard

In many respects, then, the Dockyard was an unusually self-contained working community. This picture is strengthened by the existence of a distinctive policing system, separate from that

5 Wd Jo.n Beavis left my Lodgeing to Goe to Southwick to work

6 Th

7 Frid

8 Sd

9 S Beavis Call.d on Us and took his Cloaths — Mr Young Preach at our Sonnys This Evening

10 Md The North Star Undock from South Dock the Hydra Dock.
Mr Geo.e Waller Clark of the Cheques first Clerk Paid the Cabin Keepers and the Other Inferior officers their Sixpences for that Quarter that he said Was due When he last Paid Us up our Arrears the 30 of April last this Sixpences is for January February and March 1813

11 Tue Jo.n Clark and Tho.s Mains Comp.ys Begun Coppering the Rivoli in the North Dock in the Bason Begun a Loft

12 Wd The Rippon Whent out of harbour Clarks and mains Comp.ys Brought on The Rivoli the 6 Strake from a Loft was A B C and P mark in the Middle of the Sheets the A B C are Merchant Copper P are this Yard Made Copper The first Hole Sheet on the Starboard Bow at the 6 Strake down from Upper Part Begins A 32 B 32 C 32 and P 32 Nail.d one after the Other and the same of the A 28 B 28 C 28 and P 28 a Baft the 12 Strake is from the Keel as the Beg.. now a low first Hole Sheet foreard P 32 A 32 B 32 C 32 the P 32 a Gain and so of the 28 P A B C all fore and aft one after the Other And 15 Strake from the Keel Begins first Hole sheet foreard A 32 B 32 C 32 and P 32 and so on with the 28 aft the Sheets are Mark.d in the Middle and at one Corner of the Sheets

13 Th On Wednesday the 12 An Order Came to Superannuate Mr Tho.s Bricknell the Laws

14 Frid Cabin Keeper at the Boathouse from 3 of his Salary that is 33 . 6 . 8 1/2 year (Mr Judge was 50 .. year that was Superannuated before him)

15 Sd Clarks and Mains Comp.y finish Coppering the Rivoli, The Blake Undock from S.E. Dock in

16 S

17 Md The Rivoli Undock.d from North Dock in the Bason
The Grasshopper 18 Gun Brigg Larnch.d from the New Ground N.E. Corner Whent of the Slip 20 minutes after 12 OClock a Pretty Larnch and the Grasshopper Dock.d in the afternoon in the S.E. Dock in the Bason. A Cricket match at Milton between 22 Woman 11 Orange Ribband and 11 Blues the Orange Beat

18 Tue The Iphigenia or Efigonia Spanish frigate Whent out of harbour, The Rodney Dock in the North dock in the Bason, Two Comp.y and the Apprentices that Built the Grasshopper Copper her

19 Wd The Grasshopper Undock from S.E. Dock in the Bason the Challenger a new Gun Brigg Dock. The Royal Oak Came into harbour

20 Th The Challenger Undock.d from S.E. dock in the bason Copper.d the Menelaus Dock.

21 Frid

22 Sd An Other Board put Up on the Right hand Side Goe.n Down the Hard Consorning the Watermen

23 S

24 Md

25 Tue The Blacksmith Offer.d A pint of Coffee for Breakfast for 3 Pence P.r man the all Refuse it and in the Afternoon the Labourers had it offer.d the all Refuse it

26 Wd A Russian frigate Came into harbour, General Whetham Leutenant Governor of Portmouth was Burried at the Garrison Chapple a very Grand Sight

27 Th A New Contract of the Horses took Place mostlley new teams and Young Horses

28 Frid An Order for Jam.s Toms to be Cabin Keeper at the Boathouse in the Room of Mr Tho.s Bricknell Superannuated

29 Sd The Menelaus Undock from S.E. dock in the bason The Vesuvius New Boom Dock, Half a hollowday Whent home at 12 OClock had a Call

30 S

31 Md In the Afternoon Begun Coppering the Vesuvius Boom

Ms Day	Wk Days	An Account of my time in October 1813	S	P	F
1	Fri				
2	Sd				
3	S				
4	Mo	I Lost this Morning	3	4	..
5	Tud				
6	We				
7	Th	By an Note Put up at Callplace to goe home this Evening at 3/4 Past 5 tell further orders			
8	Frid				
9	Sd	High wages with Some of the Shipwt of the Yard Sence the weekly Pay to Sume as Same			
10	S	The Moneys Came into the Yard this Morning for the People of the Yard			
11	Md				
12	Tud	The Spartan Dockd in the South dock			
13	We	Two Companys Wilcocks and Hy Derricks begun Coppering the Laurel Convick Ship			
14	Th	This Day The Principle Officers Sub Mesourers Cabin Keeper Quartermen Of Shipwt and all the Salary Men Paid their Quarters pay for July August and September at the Clerk of the Cheeques Office The Principle Officers Paid in the Morning the Others after 2 O Clock afternoon This is the First time of beeing Paid at the Clerk of the Cheeques Office The finish Coppering the Laurel Cd Salary Cabin Keepers &c Paid their quarters Pay a litle [illegible] as the Principle officers of the [illegible]			
15	Frid	Lost The Laurel Convick Ship Undockd from Middle Dock in the bason the Arveprints Friderigh	6	8	
16	Sd	Lost my mate took my Note for my weeks Subsistance and Give it me on Monday Morning Dockd Dean	6	8	
17	S				
18	Mo	Two Compy Grose Thos Millr begun Coppering the Cresy By an Order from Mr Raynes by Jos Stairs for Me to Give the Account of the Cabin Keepers Absent time Weekley of the Shipwright Cabin Keys			
19	Tud	The Place Ware The Sailmaker Dipts their Twine on the Watering Island Caught fire People of the Yard and Sailors Put it out Yesterday Whent home a Quarter Sooner in the Evening at the 1/4 Past 5			
20	We				
21	Th	The Cresy Undockd from North Dock in the Bason and lay in the bason The Dock Run Dry And the Blocks Rip Up and a New Sett of Builder Seppens.s Theom Block With Cast Iron Wedges and Wrought Plates 3/4 thick Put Down Mr Chubb Left my Lodgeing			
22	Frid				
23	Sd	The Achilles Dockd in the North Dock in the bason A Copper Ball of 3-6 Diamiter Put on the Top of the New Building Between the Sailloft and the Rigging House on the watering Island it is Made of thin Copr the flag Staff Goes through the Middle of it			
24	S	Charles Mr Williams Left my Lodgeing			
25	Md	Whent into the Yard this Morning 1/4 after 6 Came Home 1/4 After 5			
26	Tud				
27	Wd				
28	Th				
29	Frid				
30	Sd	Thos Millers Compy begun Riping Up the Frolick 6 Days in the long dock of Blacksmith Det			
31	S				

Another page from the diary of William Webber October 1813.
Portsmouth City Records Office

which patrolled the streets of the town. Because of its size and the nature of its activities, the Dockyard had its fair share of workplace crime. Its management had to guard against theft, mostly of materials but sometimes of cash, and there was also the occasional violent assault; in addition, there were the possibilities - remote but serious - of sabotage by a hostile power. In the absence of professional police forces in the community before the 1830s, the Navy Board and Admiralty had evolved their own policing systems for the dockyards.

The basic framework of Dockyard policing was laid down in the 1770s, at the time of the American War. During the working day, the Yard had its own force of full-time civilian warders, recruited from the scavelmen and labourers of the Yard; there were between 36 and 38 warders during the 1820s, under the command of a civilian Yard Warden (recruited from among the half-pay lieutenants of the Navy). At night, there were 80 part-time watchmen, recruited from the daytime workforce, and allowed to sleep in shifts for up to two-thirds of their watch so that they would be fit for work the next morning. Both by day and by night there was a military guard (replaced by Marines in 1819) of some 100 men and officers. These two separate groups of guards provided, in the words of Sir George Grey, 'two descriptions of Centinels who are not likely to connive at each other or at any depredation which might otherwise be attempted'.[45] By and large, the system remained unchanged until the 1830s.

The establishment of a standing Dockyard police force in 1834 was among the reforming measures introduced by the cost-conscious Sir James Graham. Even so, the new Dockyard police force included many men who had previously served as wardens or elsewhere in the Yard, starting with the Yard Warden who was appointed head of the new force. Unlike its predecessor, though, the new force was full-time; it also wore a distinctive uniform, topped off with a cloak and bowler hat. The Marines stayed on, albeit in much reduced numbers.[46] The new system was therefore somewhat similar to the old one. In 1860, however, the Admiralty asked that the Metropolitan Police take over the guarding of the Yard. Transferred from London, and living in barracks, the Metropolitan force had no particular connections with the dockyardmen and were regarded with enormous suspicion by them. Indeed, the Metropolitan men met with hostility from across the community at large. When a constable was assaulted by workers in the Victualling Yard, the Gosport magistrates refused to convict.[47]

Why should the Metropolitan Police meet such antagonism from supposedly respectable and unquestionably middle class magistrates? The truth is that although reported crime in the Dockyard was low, untold numbers of citizens benefited from the trade in pilfered materials. Yard police were primarily concerned with the protection of property. While pilfering had declined during the 1820s and 1830s, it was still an important source of income for many local citizens.

Pilfering was probably at its height during the late eighteenth century. Most lucrative of all was the theft of copper and brass; one Portsmouth receiver, Edward Brine, was found in 1780 to be employing three smiths and a founder to rework government copper before sending it on to London. One historian estimates that by the time of the French Wars, embezzlement was 'so universal and well-organized as to constitute a criminal social system which extended so far as to include parts of the machinery of justice'.[48] Opportunities diminished after 1815, but men continued to coil rope around their bodies or in their hats, stuff copper and brass down trouser legs or into waistbands, and throw lead over the ship's side. It was even said that furniture in the Yard officers' homes was made of pilfered wood.[49] If most thefts were small-scale, though, the reworking and sale of stolen goods could be a medium sized business. Members of the Darby family, coppersmiths and braziers from Portsea who reworked embezzled stores for sale to London fences, stood trial repeatedly between 1810 and 1828; five members of the family were involved, the father John Darby, his wife Ann, and three sons, as well as employees in the Portsmouth and Gosport Yards.[50] The Darby trials were, however, the last of their kind. With Richard Darby sentenced to fourteen years' transportation in 1828, Portsmouth was to hear no further allegations of large-scale organized crime in connection with the Yard. Pilfering continued, but on a much-reduced scale.[51]

Yet so vast was the Yard that even small-scale pilfering could add up to a significant activity. In their first year of service, the Metropolitan Police detected 645 persons pilfering, compared with a mere 65 in the last year under the old Dockyard Police. The Metropolitan force also prosecuted 42 of Portsmouth's marine stores dealers in their first year, and claimed that another 83 shopkeepers had discontinued business.[52] In other words, many local retailers appear to have benefited for some years from the trade in embezzled goods. It is little wonder that the Metropolitan Police faced such antagonism. What is more surprising is the implication that those involved may have included members of the magistracy, suggesting that the web of corruption reached widely through the community.

Labour Organization among the Dockyardmen

Formal labour organization within the dockyards was relatively weak. Trade unions developed late, strikes were few, and the workforce was divided between skilled and unskilled, established and hired. How, then, did the dockyardmen organize to advance their interests, and those of their community? For organize they did; and gradually, if slowly, the old ways of organizing via petition and crowd pressure were subsumed into the new methods of trades unionism and political mobilization. Consistently over time, the dockyardmen maintained a strong commitment to co-operation, both amongst themselves, but also generally with management. Yet if they were deferential, they were not servile. Direct confrontation with management was rare, not because the dockyardmen were unusually submissive or fearful,

but because the rules of labour regulation were broadly understood and for most of the time accepted by both sides.

Until the mid-1850s, most British shipbuilding and engineering unions were local affairs, based on a single port or town. However, some skilled trades had developed their own national associations, and dockyardmen occasionally set up branches of these craft unions in Portsmouth. Some of the millwrights and ropemakers belonged to national trade unions as early as 1800; engineering workers in the steam factory probably brought their union cards with them, for the Amalgamated Society of Engineers had Portsmouth members from the early 1850s. There was a branch of the Boilermakers as well, though we only know of its existence from its collections on behalf of striking cotton workers in Preston in 1853. Elsewhere in the Yard, union membership was apparently negligible. Shipwrights applied in 1874 to join the Amalgamated Society of Shipwrights (founded in 1856), then withdrew when they took exception to the Society's rulebook, subsequently changing their minds once more when they found ASE members at work fitting out metal ships.[53] No union existed in Britain which would take unskilled labourers until the 1880s, other than such short-lived ventures as the Owenite Grand National Consolidated. Some sailmakers belonged to the Government Workers' Federation.[54]

Absence of trade unionism did not, though, mean that the dockyardmen had no workplace organization. Like many nineteenth-century industrial workers, the dockyardmen had evolved a range of methods of advancing their common interests, the most important of which had a long tradition. Two chief methods existed in the early nineteenth century of taking up a grievance: a march on the Master Shipwright's office; and the election of a committee to draw up a petition. By the 1830s, the Admiralty and the Yard authorities tried to control both methods, particularly the first, which they regarded as intimidatory and likely to end in rioting. In 1841, the Yard management encouraged the men to set up permanent representative committees, instead of electing them solely to draw up a petition.[55] Subsequently, the Admiralty, complaining of a 'daily' flow of petitions from 'the Artificers and Workmen', announced that they would in future accept only those petitions which were sent on by the Yard management.[56] Together, these measures had the effect of setting labour relations within the Yard, and weakening the role of the Admiralty in all but the most important cases.

Grievances were handled far more through petitioning than by any other method, a practice which lasted well into the twentieth century. Most of the petitions concerned pay, with pensions - the second most frequent issue - a long way behind. Third most common among the grievances was the classification system introduced during Sir James Graham's administration, in an attempt to match pay scales to efficiency.[57] The men's response to classification confirms that although all accepted the principle of division by craft, there was enormous resistance to any attempt to separate individuals from one another: classification, according to the blacksmiths, was 'derogatory to human justice'. John Hobbs, a shipwright in the 1850s recalled that 'I was a first class man and had many enemies'. As late as the 1890s, the 'Trades' were still unanimously against classification, and the Admiralty finally abandoned it.[58] The most active petitioners by a long chalk were the shipwrights, followed by the ropemakers, sawyers and smiths. Petitioning followed a well-trodden routine: grievances were stated explicitly and signed by large numbers of men, so as to avoid the possibility of intimidation; their language was very formal, and made frequent use of archaic and highly deferential terms of praise for the authorities.

Reports of strikes were much less frequent. Those which have been recorded involved the hired plumbers (1833), shipwrights and smiths (1839), hired masons (1848), hired sawyers and hired shipwrights (1859) and hired shipwrights again (1860). Pay once more was the most frequent grievance, followed this time by hours. For instance, in 1839 the Admiralty decided to add fifteen minutes to the working day to make up for time lost at musters. All work stopped on the day the order was introduced, and the shipwrights marched on the Master Shipwright's office. He persuaded the men to petition the Admiralty, and quietly dropped the new system.[59] In the same year, the Yard authorities tried to cut the time allowed to smiths to clean up before lunch. They too struck and marched on the Master Shipwright's office, but though they won in 1839 their lunch breaks were successfully cut in 1841, with the smiths' committee suspended from work for their pains.[60] These stoppages were unusual in that they involved established men; far more commonly it was the hired men who were behind any strike action.

Finally, there was one riot. Its importance is that it confirms that labour relations in the Yard depended on a negotiated and conditional peace, in which management respected the skilled workers' integrity and the dockyardmen accepted management's judgement. Behind the riot lay the skilled men's outrage at being subjected to searches by the Dockyard police introduced under Graham in the early 1830s. As has been noted, the Yard force existed chiefly to deter outsiders from entering, and to control pilfering. A serious riot broke out among shipwrights in December 1840 after one of their colleagues was searched in what they regarded as an insensitive manner. Troops had to be brought in to clear the Yard; the search regulations were subsequently changed.[61] It was not that the Dockyard police were particularly disliked by the shipwrights, but that their behaviour represented a step beyond the tolerable.

The Dockyardmen outside the Yard

As the largest single workforce in the town, the Yard workers naturally had a significant influence on local life. Their opinions were courted by those politicians who sought to speak on behalf of the people, while their public institutions - co-operatives, friendly societies and political groups - dominated the associational life of Portsmouth's working class. Yet despite its size, the public

Redundant dockyardmen and their families setting out from Portsmouth to start a new life in Canada, 1869.
Illustrated London News 1 May 1869

influence of the Yard workforce was relatively limited. This is particularly true of local politics, where the dockyardmen made barely any independent impact.

Of course, Portsmouth politics had little place for working men before 1867 (and even less for women). Liberal control over the Borough Council and parliamentary elections was complete until the 1850s, when the Conservatives won their first parliamentary seat. Only after the 1867 Reform Act did dockyardmen have the vote in any numbers; and they used it in the general election of 1868 to register their disgust at a Liberal government which had caused the sacking of so many of their fellows (the 1868 cuts were so severe that several hundred Portsmouth families simply gave up on the town, migrating to Canada). Support for popular radical movements - notably the Chartists in the 1830s and 1840s, and the reform movement in the 1850s and 1860s - came from a broad range of the local working class; indeed, the secretary of the shipwrights' committee, Henry Johnson, was sacked for his Chartist activities.[62] Landport, the suburb where most dockyardmen lived, remained at the centre of Portsmouth's radical politics well into the twentieth century, electing a number of dissident councillors such as the maverick populist John Augustus Howell Howell.

In many nineteenth-century towns and cities, it was the politics of poor relief which mobilized the working class. Although the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act imposed a property qualification on candidates for the Board of Guardians, the electorate itself included all ratepayers (thus including a small number of women). Once the agitation against the 1834 Act died down, this extended franchise allowed working men to exercise a degree of direct influence in Guardians' elections that they were denied elsewhere in local politics. In Portsmouth, however, the continuity of Dockyard employment meant that a large section of the working class was only marginally concerned with the way that poor relief was administered. Dockyardmen could afford to take a lofty view of poor relief politics: their pension would provide for old age, while friendly society benefits covered sickness or injury. Even in the periodic slumps which followed, government economies did not seriously threaten the majority of dockyardmen. This is not to say that they ignored the dockyardmen: in 1867, for example, there were complaints that the Portsea Island Guardians were offering outdoor relief to unemployed dockyard workers, despite a clear legal bar on outdoor relief to able-bodied men.[63] Even in this arena, then, the dockyardmen exerted some influence.

Further, as a group, the dockyardmen supported a number of radical causes. In 1874, they opened a subscription in support of the men named in an indictment as inspiring the rioters during the Battle of Southsea;[64] the engineers, though apparently not other dockyardmen, gave their support to Mrs Josephine Butler's campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts,[65] and so on. Portsmouth's working class politics was typified by the complex loyalties of the dockyardmen. They provided the grass roots of radical initiatives, yet enough of them voted Conservative (on the grounds that the Conservatives favoured a strong Navy) to undermine the Liberals' hold on the Parliamentary constituency. Perhaps this pattern is the key to explaining why no independent working class political movement emerged in Portsmouth during the nineteenth century on a scale comparable to that found in other towns of a similar size and social structure.

Co-operation's appeal, on the other hand, was uniquely strong in Portsmouth, and nowhere more so than among the dockyardmen. The earliest co-operative was the Dock Mill Society, established in May 1796 to enable the dockyardmen to buy cheap bread. When the Admiralty announced plans to extend the Yard in 1815, the mill was closed but a second was acquired which produced bread and flour in Southsea; the dockyardmen also made beer, at Croxton Town (now the western fringe of Southsea), and in 1816 they extended into butchering.[66] When local retailers petitioned the Navy Board complaining of the loss of trade, some 500 or 600 dockyardmen gathered outside the house of one of the leading petitioners in Charlotte Street, behaving

> in a very tumultuous manner, blowing horns, and offered some violence, by throwing stones and breaking his windows.[67]

Nothing more was heard of the petition, and the Societies continued to prosper for some years. The dates of their closure or merger into wider bodies are uncertain, though the Brewery Society lost its premises in 1851. Certainly the Dock Mill Society was still in being in 1861, when a members' meeting was advertised in the press.[68] In the meantime, supporters of the Chartists among the Yard men attempted in 1847 to set up a Working Men's Co-operative Society. A general co-operative society, launched by radicals in 1857, included 18 seamen, eight publicans, a policeman, a schoolteacher and even seven women among its 519 members. Nearly half of the members were shipwrights and a further 15% were ropemakers, and it looks as though all the committee members were dockyardmen as well.[69] Co-operation had a lasting appeal to the dockyardmen. Broadly, the philosophy of co-operation corresponded to the practices of craft solidarity found within the Dockyard itself. Similarly, groups of Dockyard workers banded together formally inside the Yard to form friendly societies, designed to help their members establish a small degree of independence from the Yard pension and sickness systems. Most informal were the 'box clubs' - simple collecting boxes, whose proceeds were shared among the widows and orphans of dockyardmen - and the 'broken bone clubs', who collected 1*d*. a week from every member if one of their number was injured. Others, for example the Dockyard Joiners' Club, were a little more elaborate, while the Dockyard Union Insurance Society (established in 1824) and the Union Burial Fund Society (founded shortly after 1815) were highly organized. It was alleged in 1874 that it was possible for a dockyardman to receive more while

The hundred-feet-high Dock Mill, Napier Road, Southsea, which produced flour for the Dock Mill Society and Bread Company from c.1816 until the early Victorian period. It was demolished c.1924.
Hampshire County Library

nursing a broken limb - in the form of club money and half-pay from the Dockyard - than he did while working.[70]

Mutual aid principles also characterized the Yard workers' somewhat loose involvement with adult education. An early attempt by local civic leaders to set up a Mechanics' Institute floundered until the dockyardmen secured control over its committee. It was agreed formally in 1825

> That the proposed Institution be under the direction and superintendence of the Operative Classes themselves, aided only by such assistance from others as they shall be desirous of receiving.

Of the sixteen craftsmen on the Institute's first committee, four were shipwrights and three were millwrights. Similarly, an attempt by the government to establish a penny library fell when the men demanded a say in its management, and more particularly in the choice of books. However, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the Dockyard workforce had relatively limited interest in adult education. While repeated reductions in the Yard were presumably partly to blame for the Mechanics' Institute being taken over by shopkeepers and clerks, it was the dockyardmen's influence which produced majorities at town meetings against proposals for libraries for 'the working classes', in 1853, 1860, and 1869. At bottom, the conflict was mainly over the question of control. As the *Hampshire Telegraph* complained,

> any proposal emanating from the middle classes is viewed with a jealous eye, and an inner motive is supposed to be concealed in the outward profession.

Rather, the dockyardmen preferred to keep their own resources, with reading rooms in co-operative stores, and newspaper readings in the workplace.[71]

Mutual aid implied above all freedom from dependence. Co-operation removed the dockyardmen and their families from the need to rely on credit and adulterated goods from the local shopocracy; friendly societies lessened their dependence upon Admiralty largesse and removed their families from the power of the poor law guardians. So far as adult education was concerned, resistance to dependence on others was so strong as to delay for some decades the foundation of a local library system. It is significant too that the creation of new mutual aid institutions frequently came at times of depression and cut-backs, when the jobs of hired and established men alike were vulnerable.

Typically, then, the strongest organizations of the dockyardmen, and especially the skilled men, took two forms. First, within the Yard, they operated through informal co-ordination between the different work groups in a trade, using the committee system that had been inherited from the eighteenth century. David Wilson, in his study of the Yard during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, described this form of organization as 'ad hoc unionism'.[72] Second, inside and outside the Yard they established co-operative and friendly societies designed to protect them and their families as consumers - and were apparently highly successful at doing so. Other working class organizations - trade unions, independent political movements - attracted far less support by comparison, with consequences that lasted until well into the next century.

The Dockyard in Perspective

Economically, politically and culturally, the Dockyard profoundly shaped Portsmouth in the nineteenth century, and therefore, in the present. Its existence has been at the core of the town's identity for a long time, and its decline has not been easy to accept. At its peak, almost every local inhabitant who had to work for a living depended in the end on the Dockyard, from Master Shipwright to

lawyer waiting for his fees, from the Admiral Superintendent to the humble stallholder hawking relishes at the Dockyard gates. Throughout this period, it is difficult to overstate the Yard's significance.

Economically, then, the Dockyard has tended to dominate the town's life. Inevitably this has spilled over into political life, though it must be acknowledged that the political influence of the Dockyard has tended to be indirect. Even in the politics of poor relief, where the yardmen had controlled the system until the slump of 1817, the nature of Dockyard employment tended to cushion the workforce against those forces which politicized working people elsewhere. This was not to change until the late 1860s, when the sight of unemployed hired men and their families setting sail for Canada was to etch itself into the memories of a generation. In general, the dockyardmen tended to withdraw into their own protective associations rather than become involved in a wider working class politics. With very few exceptions, friendly societies and co-operatives held far deeper attractions than Chartism or radical politics. Nor were the Yard officials much involved in local politics (though Sir George Grey allied himself firmly with the Whig reformers grouped around the Carter family in the 1820s and 1830s). The health of the Yard was always a sharp political issue, especially in a slump, and local politicians ignored it at their peril; but the workforce looked to self-help rather than politics to solve its problems.

Culturally, the Dockyard's main influence has lain in the profound patriotism of many local people. National ritual and symbolism dominated Dockyard life, and pervaded the thinking of its workforce. The two surviving diaries of nineteenth-century dockyardmen are full of references to royalty, to Naval affairs and to individual ships - no other items appear anything like as often.[73] Politically, of course, the Yard's existence for a long time dominated voting behaviour: politicians who did badly by the Yard, like Baring, lost popularity; those who did well, or were expected to do well by it, gained. Economically too the Yard continued in its dominance until the late 1970s; much of the rest of the local economy came to depend on it, and diversification into civil marine engineering was undoubtedly hampered for decades by the Navy's exclusive control of most of the available waterfront. Looking forward rather than backward, one may question the wisdom of such a single minded focus in both political thought and economic activity alike.

Yet the Dockyard has also bequeathed another inheritance. Admiration for the skill of its workmen, combined with appreciation of the beauty and durability of the product, are also rooted in Portsmouth's identity. There are worse principles of political and economic organisation, too, than those of quiet mutual co-operation. For better or for worse, then, the Dockyard's influence has been profound, and it will undoubtedly be a lasting one.

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